

Overview Report of the Plan Commission for the City of Columbus, Ohio

This pamphlet presents an overview of the “Report of the Plan Commission for the City of Columbus, Ohio”, (published in February of 1908) on the occasion of its 100th anniversary. The 1908 Plan is a strong example of the “City Beautiful” era of urban plans that were created throughout the country in the early part of the 20th Century.

A summary of the core planning principles that are expressed in the 1908 Plan include:

- ✧ Importance of comprehensive planning to simultaneously improve quality of life and enhance economic competitiveness
- ✧ Use of urban design to create an organized, efficient, livable city
- ✧ Protection and beautification of river banks
- ✧ Connectivity — parks, boulevards, and parkways that provide green connections throughout the city
- ✧ Parkway (roadways) that follow rivers to create pleasing drives
- ✧ Importance of incorporating art into public life
- ✧ Need for close monitoring and advocacy to implement plan provisions

These basic planning principles have indeed stood the test of time. The 100th anniversary of the 1908 Plan is a particularly opportune time to recognize and celebrate Columbus’ planning legacy in the form of the 1908 Plan.

Historical Context

The late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States witnessed strong population growth in cities as a result of industrialization. Severe overcrowding along with a lack of basic city services such as sanitary sewer, clean water supply, and refuse disposal lead to outbreaks of cholera, social unrest, and unacceptable living conditions for large segments of the nation’s population.

It was out of this environment that the roots of the city planning profession were formed. Architects, engineers, artists, landscape architects and others advocated a design-based approach to improving American cities. This became known as the “City Beautiful” movement and ultimately led to the formation of a number of the first city plans in the country, including the 1908 Columbus Plan.

Perhaps the most well known expression of the City Beautiful movement was the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, led by architect Daniel H. Burnham and held in Chicago to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery” of the New World (one year late). Its focus was the development of the “White City”, including a main court of all white, monumental and vaguely classical buildings that were focused on an open space of water. “In contrast to the filth and blight of American cities, the White City seemed a utopia” (Source: The City Beautiful Movement).



The “White City” from the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.

Charles Mulford Robinson, member of the Columbus Plan Commission and primary author of the 1908 Columbus Plan, attended, was influenced by, and wrote about the Columbian Exposition. “Robinson became the most articulate and persuasive spokesman for [the] efforts to improve American cities, and his first book, The Improvement of Cities and Towns, published in 1901, became the bible of the movement. A subsequent work of 1903, Modern Civic Art, reflected broader concerns with more substantive city planning projects. Both books proved so popular that they went through several editions.” (Source: Reps) Robinson also held the first planning professorship in the United States (established at the University of Illinois, Urbana), serving as Professor of Civic Design during 1913-17.

The Plan

The movement to form a plan for Columbus began in 1900, “in a systematic agitation by the Columbus Board of Trade for a Better and Greater Columbus”. In 1904 Mayor Robert H. Jeffrey “appointed a committee to investigate the project of an improved park system”. This commission began work that ultimately led to the appropriation of funds by the City Council and the hiring of a commission of experts to form what would become the 1908 Plan. The commission consisted of A. W. Lord, architect; C. N. Lowrie, landscape architect; Albert Kelsey, architect; H. A. McNeil, sculptor, and Charles Mulford Robinson, civic advisor, all from outside of Columbus. In addition to addressing parks, they also took up the study of streets and boulevards.



Mayor Robert H. Jeffrey

An important note regarding the 1908 Plan was that it was one of the earliest attempts at planning of this sort for a city of Columbus’ size. Indeed the Columbus City Council authorization for the planning work took place without state enabling legislation and the authors of the plan were not paid for years after the plan was completed, after the State made it legal for cities to undertake planning (Source: Gerckens).

Elements of the 1908 Plan include the 1) Introduction, 2) The General Survey, 3) Parks, Parkway and Recreation Grounds, and 4) The Civic Center. In the introduction, the authors provide sound rationale for the formation of a city plan and address any concerns about its funding by stating “Can a man afford to deprive his child of health and beauty for lack of pure air? Can a business man afford to buy stock for his business? Can anyone afford to refuse to prepare for the future?”



“The proposed mall will wipe out this squalid neighborhood, and in its place provide a park and some of the best building sites in the city.” (photo and caption from the 1908 Plan)

The General Survey

The General Survey element of the Plan states that it would need to fulfill the goals of providing for a capital city of a “great State calling for spectacular effectiveness — for the magnificent and splendid in its development; the industrial community demanding the facilitation of commerce, and the utilitarian provision of ample recreative facilities for a working population; and the educational aspect of the city, inviting an exceedingly artistic development of restful beauty and refinement”. The authors called for a plan that would unify, providing “orderliness and system”, but not uniformity.

Parks, Parkway and Recreation Grounds

The Parks, Parkway and Recreation Grounds element calls for additional parks space as a crucial aspect of the development of the city. This should be more “essentially a part of the urban structure” and would be socially and economically beneficial. The 1908 Plan calls for a variety of parks throughout the city and land acquisition far beyond the city limits “while it is cheap and held until an increased urban population shall give to it intended park use”.

Furthermore, the Plan states that “parks, boulevards and parkways double and triple the value of adjacent property” and that open spaces “immensely increase the efficiency of labor, and attract to the city a better class of labor, factors than which nothing is of greater economic importance to an industrial city”. Specific plans are provided for neighborhood parks, including pools, recreational facilities and detailed park site plans.

Detailed recommendations are also provided for a system of boulevards and parkways (including a wide parkway encircling the city at a radius of three miles from the civic center) to interconnect the city’s parks, streams, and open spaces. Indeed, connectivity between parks, green space, with the Statehouse as the central focus, is one of the primary tenets of the plan: “So there is completed the great circuit of the girdle of boulevards and parkways, which joins all the parks in one connected drive, giving to every section of the city its boulevard or parkway from a hundred to three hundred feet in width, and which offer a beautiful way of going, not only from park to park, but from one quarter of the city to another. There remain only to be noted in the three-mile zone the radials that tie the ring to the center at the State House Mall, and that thus complete the organizing of widely scattered park areas into a well-knit urban system.”



“One of several extensive views along the Big Walnut.” (photo and caption from the 1908 Plan).



“Proposed treatment for Franklin Park.” (plan and caption from the 1908 Plan).

The Civic Center

The final element of the 1908 Plan is for a civic center, the heart of the city. The plan recognizes the existing Statehouse as one of the best monuments in the country, “resting on a superb site”. A mall was proposed to extend from the Statehouse down to the Scioto River, with a prominent building to be constructed to terminate the vista on the west side of the river. Public and private buildings would frame the north and south edges of the mall, and the McKinley statue would be a predominant feature of the new urban space. A city hall, state buildings, art gallery, music hall and other public buildings were proposed as part of the civic center complex.

As noted, the civic center was recommended to be connected to the rest of the city by boulevards and parkways. The resulting civic center, boulevard and park system “means the whole structure of Columbus may assume an order and system which it has not before had.”

In their concluding comments, the 1908 Plan authors make the case for implementation by stating that “the time has arrived when some definite scheme should be devised looking to the organic development of the city along practical and artistic lines. And this must result in increasing its wealth not only by improving the natural conditions, but by attracting legitimate investment, and above all, by making Columbus a better and pleasanter place in which to live”.



The Results

“Although efforts were made to try to get the plan adopted and to establish a permanent planning commission for Columbus, and a bond issue was discussed for 1912, nothing ever happened. The Columbus Dispatch probably represented the local feeling fairly accurately when it said of the proposal:

‘They are very elaborate, highly artistic and provide for a Columbus of 50 to 100 years from now. The immense cost, however, and the many practical impediments in the way, will prevent their being carried out in anything like their entirety. What is denominated the “Civic Group” being a scheme for the beautification of the section between Broad and State and Fourth and Mitchell Streets is a conspicuous feature of the plans and represents the extreme of the designers’ idealism’ ” (Source: Darbee and Recchie).

Indeed, the mall proposed in the 1908 Plan would have required the demolition of the Dispatch building, the Neil House Hotel and a factory owned by a locally prominent family.

Nevertheless, as opportunities presented themselves, the “plan shaped Columbus the way it is today.” The 1913 flood destroyed what is now Front Street and lower lying areas on the west side of the river. What to do with the area became a crucial issue for the city. The fact that the area had just been heavily devastated by flood prevented private interest in redevelopment — the public sector was the only entity that could invest in this land (Source: Gerckens).

In the years subsequent to the flood, Frank Packard, an influential Columbus architect and then president of the Board of Trade, and newspaper publisher Robert Wolfe “began to promote the creation of a civic center along the riverfront; the 1921 destruction by fire of Columbus City Hall, on State Street across from the Statehouse, (currently the site of the Ohio Theatre), enhanced the argument for such an undertaking. On January 1, 1921, even before the City Hall fire added more urgency to the effort, a plan for the proposed Civic Center was published in the local press” (Source: Darbee and Recchie).

This effort in effect turned the 1908 civic center plan from an east-west orientation to a north-south orientation, with the Scioto River serving as the open space instead of the proposed mall. Buildings ultimately constructed as part of this civic center include Veterans Memorial, Central High School, Columbus City Hall, the State Office Building, and the U.S. Courthouse. In the end, the civic center that was constructed along the river exceeded that envisioned by the 1908 Plan by a factor of three and gave the downtown the character that the community is building on today (Source: Gerckens).

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A Summary of the

**“Report of the Plan Commission for
the City of Columbus, Ohio”**

February, 1908

Columbus’ “City Beautiful” Plan